

MINUTES

Quarterly Meeting of the MISSOURI VETERANS COMMISSION

Held, pursuant to notice

Thursday, November 4, 2004 — 9:00 AM

St. Louis VA Regional Office, 4th Floor Training Rooms C & D
400 South 18th St.
St. Louis, Missouri

I. CALL TO ORDER

A. Invocation & Pledge of Allegiance

B. Roll Call

In attendance: **Chairman Emmett Fairfax; Vice Chairman Carson Ross; Member Bernadette Miller; Member Carl Niewoehner; Member General Arvid West**

C. Introductions

Guests and staff present.

1. Guest: **Jim Whitfield**, MO Military Funeral Honors Program; **John Eckhoff**, St. Louis County Human Services; **Kathy Sturgeon**, St. Louis County Human Services; **Nancy Arnold**, Director VA Medical Center Poplar Bluff; **Glen Struchtemeyer**, VAMC St. Louis; **Kevin Inkley**, VAMC St. Louis; **Andrew Edwards**, DAV; **Terry Tabor**, DAV; **Henry Koontz**, DAV; **Col. Wayne Medley**, MO Military Funeral Honors Program; **Chuck Wooten**, Missouri Veterans commission; **Richard Heigert**, American Legion/MAVO; **David Shafer**, American Legion; **Michael Bounds**, City of St. Louis

2. Staff: **Ronald Taylor**, Executive Director; **Jill Talken**, Executive Secretary; **Sharon Keith**, Director, Service to Veterans Program; **Hal Dulle**, Deputy Director; **Jess Rasmussen**, Director Higginsville Cemetery; **Anne Payne**, Superintendent of Homes; **Tim Norton**, Director of Properties; **Stan Baughn**, Director Veterans Benefits Awareness Program; **Pat Rowe Kerr**, Veterans Benefits Awareness Coordinator

D. Approval of September 20, 2004 Commission Meeting Minutes. The minutes of the previous meeting were approved as recorded.

II. OLD BUSINESS:

Management Report: Executive Director Comments: Ronald Taylor

- 1) **Commission Update** – Ron Taylor advised that key messages for the Commission are being established for the programs and will be finalized over the next few weeks. The Veterans Home message includes the need for additional funding and the next dealing with the strengthening of the VCCITF. The VSO and the VBATF message was distributed to the Commissioners. Ron asked the Commissioners to look over the messages and to submit recommendations by November 12th. The goal is to have the final form completion date by the end of November in order to have available for the next staff meeting in Central Office, Executive Committee meeting (Dec. 9th) and Cemetery Directors meeting. These three key messages will be what staff stresses when speaking to media, legislators, new administration, assistance leagues, stakeholders and veteran service organizations. Each message also includes supporting documentation.

Mr. Taylor stated this is going to be a very critical year for the Commission in terms of funding and legislative support. To continue the present operations MVC is \$15 to \$16 million dollars short which will require a fund switch to GR. It is important that all our staff know these issues because many of them come in direct contact with the stakeholders in the areas of the Homes and Cemeteries and if they are approached by those legislators or those veterans groups we want to make sure they are aware of the key issues.

- 2) Freshman Legislative Tour schedule:

December 2nd, Nevada, MO, "hands on" demonstration given by all agencies to show how services are provided to the public and how the agencies interact with each other. Sharon Keith, Janeene Pierce and Stan Baughn will be attending.

December 14th, St. Louis Veterans Home (power point presentation)

December 15th, Bloomfield Veterans Cemetery

- 2) **Budget** - Ron Taylor advised that he and Julie Miller, Chief Accountant met with the Senate and House Budget Analyst and Budget & Planning on October 27th. The meeting gave the Commission the first opportunity to talk to the Budget Analysts from all three entities about what our basic needs are, why important, and how essential it is to continue to operate all three programs and what it means to the state of

Missouri to have those programs. Julie Miller also met with the new BAP Analyst in the executive branch to discuss our projections concerning the VCCITF. Mr. Taylor advised MVC will be revising those projections in the next few weeks and we hope to have update in mid to end December. We also expect to receive the Governor's recommendation around that time. The BAP Analyst seemed sympathetic to MVC's current funding situation. Commissioner Ross asked if the analysts that we have been meeting with will continue employment since the election. Mr. Taylor stated yes.

Mr. Taylor stated he believes this year to be a critical year for the Missouri Veterans Commission and that it is important for staff, service organizations and VA representatives to visit with their legislators on Veterans Appreciation Day at the Capitol Building and get the key messages out. Commissioner Ross requested that wherever MVC has a facility those Administrators, Directors or service officers send letters to their district Representatives and Senators inviting them to visit. Mr. Taylor noted this has been discussed. He stated that we must often and frequently let the legislators know what the VA, Veterans Commission and service organizations do, discuss veterans healthcare issues and veterans benefits.

Hal Dulle stated that the Joint Interim Committee on Veterans Issues released their findings last week. Chairman Kinder and Vice Chairman Jackson have indicated the top three issues for MVC will be funding Homes Program, VCCITF and deployment of Missouri National Guard and Reservists. The following recommendations will be presented to the General Assembly when it convenes in January, 2005:

1. Commit full and adequate support of continued operation of all 1,350 beds at Missouri's veterans' homes;
2. Ensure that the Veterans Commission Capitol Improvement Trust Fund (VCCITF) is adequately supported and funded to maintain cemeteries' and homes' capitol improvement projects and Veterans Service organizations' grants;
3. Establish the Family Military Relief Fund through an income tax check-off and other sources, to be administered through a joint program developed by the Missouri Veterans Commission and Missouri National Guard; (\$ not determined yet possible ½ million to 1 million seed money to establish fund to be administered by a joint program developed by MVC and MNG.)
4. Establish a non-merit Veterans Ombudsman program within the Missouri Veterans Commission to coordinate a one-stop

clearinghouse for information on all veterans benefits for family members and deployed service personnel both during deployment and upon return; (Pat Rowe Kerr has currently been working on)

5. Increase the state employees' paid military leave from 10 to 20 days annually;
6. Develop an educational program to provide financial assistance to spouses of disabled veterans wishing to return to school, since the spouse will now likely serve as the primary income generator;
7. Develop an educational program to provide financial assistance to spouses and dependents of deployed service personnel who have lost monthly income due to the deployment;
8. Provide state assistance for small business owners who are veterans;
9. Provide financial assistance for "gap" expenditures that families of injured veterans incur while seeking medical assistance of injured service member. These expenses might include child care, a nutritional supplement or a spouse's lost income while accompanying injured service person to medical appointments;
10. Revise Chapter 42 to broaden the mission of the Missouri Veterans Commission to include "servicemen and women of current deployments", not just "veterans who have been discharged, honorably or general"; (Mr. Taylor stated we need to be sure the language clearly reads MO Guard and Reserves)
11. Repeal the state income tax on military pension and the income of service personnel deployed to combat zones; and
12. Provide property tax relief for service personnel deployed to combat zones.

Representative Jackson has advised MVC that these recommendations will be proposed legislation this coming session.

Commissioner Niewoehner voiced his concerns regarding the 12 point recommendations established by the Joint Committee on Veterans Issues. He stated his testimony concerning the Missouri Veterans Homes employees was listed incorrectly in the report it states VA Hospital employees could work somewhere else. He also indicated that not mentioned in the report was the 12 to 15 million dollars it would take this year just to bring MVC salaries up to current

competition and an additional 12 to 15 million dollars to pay for full staffing at our Homes. Mr. Taylor stated the Committee's desire was to release the report without arguments about precise dollar figures. He also stated that Representative Jackson sent a letter to Representative Bearden, House Budget Chair advising that at a minimum there will be a 15 million dollar fund switch needed before we even get to the decision items.

Commissioner Niewoehner noted that due to the current funding situation he absolutely opposes to revising Chapter 42. He stated the Commission was established to take care of disabled veterans with our Homes and our Service Officer Program. The Commission needs 30 million dollars and he is not willing to expand until we fully fund our current programs listed in under Chapter 42. Mr. Taylor explained we are helping disabled veterans whether we help them in filing the claim before they receive the DD214 or we wait till that has been received.

To reinforce his concerns Commissioner Niewoehner read an article from the Cape Girardeau Veterans Home News written by Jan Rau, Administrator, stating that the staff turnover has been lowest in state however staff morale has been a struggle due to years without a raise. He explained this is unacceptable if we are going to take additional money for other programs. Mr. Taylor stated that is why the key messages are out there to make sure we take of the core programs first. Commissioner Ross noted that other state agencies like the Commission have not received pay increases which amounts to a big chunk of money. Chairman Fairfax advised this is why it is important to speak to Representatives and Senators to get funding for our veterans to keep the 1,350 beds operational. Mr. Taylor stated it would be hard for the legislature to help MVC employees without also helping other state agencies. Last years recommendations of fully funding our staff for shift differentials was cut by legislators from 75 cents to 30 cents because they decided they couldn't do 75 cents for Corrections also.

Commissioner Niewoehner distributed to the Joint Committee on Veterans Issues a news article from 1965 where he attached an amendment to the Appropriation Budget Bill which created an affect just one level throughout the state of Missouri instead of two levels for City and County in pay scale. This bill passed both houses and was signed by the Governor. The state paid for it.

Ron Taylor briefed the Commissioners on the current fund balances as of November 2. The VCCITF has a balance of \$19,324,864 the biggest part of that will be transferred out during the rest of this year not for construction but to supplement the Home Fund and to pay benefits. He stated that in 1990s in being able to operate without significant large

scale resident rate increases was MVC paid the employees from the Home Fund. The state appropriated the money to cover the benefits out of GR. That ended around 2001 or 2002 as more and more they started to hit other funds rather than GR. Now for every employee who MVC pays from the Home Fund their benefits package is also paid out of the same fund and currently a deduction is about 43% of their total compensation. From last year MVC received 3 million dollars already and within this week MVC should have received the additional 3 million dollars. The first 3 million dollars we were transferred in July we thought was the 3 million dollars off the top, it wasn't, it was the 3 million dollars based upon the income exceeding the 42 million dollars. The first 3 million dollars we were eligible for are not paid till after all the bills are closed from the Gaming Commission. MVC will be receiving that next. Concerned if we hit a year where we are getting the last part first and we don't reach a high enough level to get the whole 3 million dollars, we may only get 1 or 2 million dollars in July and have to wait till November for the 3 million dollars. Chairman Fairfax stated the Gaming money will be the priority issue this session.

Missouri Veterans Homes: Anne Payne, Superintendent of Homes

Homes Program – Anne Payne reported they continue to work on those decision items in terms of cost regarding the preliminary report for the Homes Program fund request presented to the Commissioners in August. The Staffing Allocation and Recruitment of Retention cost summary includes recruitment and retention, shift differential, tuition reimbursement, and career ladder/mentoring and also overtime and expense and equipment. She updated the Commissioners on the staffing allocation part of the preliminary report stating that originally it was estimated that an additional 216 staff would be required to fully staff the Homes, however, after reviewing the staffing methodology and alternative schedules it is now believed that it would only require 128 additional staff to fully staff the Homes. This impact fiscally has a difference of about \$2 ½ million less than originally requested and MVC should be able to operate at 100% capacity. Ms. Payne noted that number is still in draft and they will continue to work.

Ms. Payne brought to their attention the standard Statistical Report included in the handout. She advised that during FY04 prior to opening 200 new beds the Homes Program operated at 92% capacity. Annually the Homes Program sends out Resident and Family Member Satisfaction Surveys which the level of satisfaction exceeded 90%. The Quality Management Outcomes report was distributed and the healthcare indicators shows MVC is doing extremely well in state and national averages.

Ms. Payne also hi-lighted that during FY04 there was an increase by 8% or 6,000 volunteer hours and 25% increase or \$146,307.00 in donated funds. Ms. Payne stated this was a record year and thanked everyone for their support.

Construction Update: Tim Norton, Director of Properties

Construction Update – Tim Norton advised that the language for the land transfer from Fort Leonard Wood to the State of Missouri for the Veterans Cemetery site has passed the U.S. House & U.S. Senate. MVC is currently working with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to do some studies in addition to have an authorization to transfer the land and other studies required or transfer. Mr. Norton has submitted the states budget request in that we have additional funds to start design and authorization to spend federal money once the grant for this project has been secured. The pre-application has been submitted for the grant and VA has advised that October 2006 the grant would be available. The studies through the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers should be complete in a year. Estimated date of opening the cemetery at Fort Leonard Wood would be late 2008 or early 2009. Mr. Taylor stated he will be speaking to Senator Bond's office about finding additional money for the next fiscal year for construction grants.

St. Louis Veterans Home project completed 100 bed dementia wing, Phase II of the existing building and the HAVC upgrade. A few punch list items remaining that are being corrected. VA should be conducting their final grant review within the next few weeks to close out this project. Ongoing projects include roof replacement, security fencing and replacing exterior doors.

Warrensburg and Cameron Veterans Homes, chiller upgrade, both of these Projects have been completed and remaining punch list items should be corrected within the next few weeks.

Cape Girardeau Veterans Home HAVC project consist of upgrading the heating , air conditioning and ventilating system, replacing flooring, renovating and expanding the kitchen, adding a solarium, dementia dining/activity room and painting resident room walls. We have received conditional approval from VA and are continuing with the design. Design should be completed and project out for bid by January/February 2005.

Mr. Norton advised the Springfield Veterans Cemetery is building a new columbarium wall. MVC will continue with state funds and should be awarded VA grant in 2005.

St. Louis Veterans Home entrance project is complete which consists of a deceleration lane at the entrance to the home.

Bloomfield Veterans Cemetery upgrades to committal shelter floor, additional section of street and upgrades to the equipment wash bay. Completion date expected December 27, 2004.

Warrensburg Veterans Home kitchen floor replacement project will wait till after winter. A portable kitchen will be required to use during that time.

Commissioner Ross questioned Mr. Norton whether the Warrensburg Home is the only home with a sewage grinder pump problem. Mr. Norton stated yes. He also advised this is a \$50,000 project.

Mr. Norton advised total current construction projects would roughly cost \$4 million, excluding Cape Girardeau project which would add an additional \$7 million. This \$4million is only adding in \$1 million cost to state for Ft. Leonard Wood bringing total Fort Leonard Wood total project to \$10 million.

Mr. Taylor stated that Mr. Norton duties have expanded to include long range planning so that we can anticipate 10-12 years out the amount of money that is going to be required to maintain and construct facilities MVC needs to continue operations.

Service to Veterans Program: Sharon Keith, Director, Service to Veterans Program

Service to Veterans – Sharon Keith distributed a handout that was included in the Counterpart Meeting packet. This was prepared as an educational tool to promote the STV and VBATF Programs. She reported the STV Program is continuing to track the claims activity from Vashon High School Supermarket. As November 1st, VA approved 11 claims, 2 pension benefits and 9 service connected disabilities. The total number of is expected to double or triple by the time all claims are processed by MVC Service Officers only.

Ms. Keith included in her handout an Introduction to the Service to Veterans Program including the mission statement, what they do, who they are, where they are located and what they can do to assist veterans. November 1st the STV program will begin a mentor pilot program which will give new STV officers support.

The STV Program has been participating in the Freedom Salute Ceremonies across the state hosted by the Missouri National Guard.

The weekend of November 6-7 there are a total of 7 ceremonies scheduled.

Cemeteries Update: Jess Rasmussen, Director Higginsville Cemetery

Cemetery Program – Jess Rasmussen showed to the Commissioners a full page ad run in the Jackson Co. Examiner advertising the Higginsville Veterans Cemetery. This ad has resulted in several pre-registrations and phone calls. The total cost for placing the ad was \$387.00 and was a one time ad.

Mr. Rasmussen stated that Commissioners should have received their invitation to the Jacksonville Open House & Tours scheduled for Sunday, November 7 at 9:00 a.m. A ceremony will be held starting at 3:00 p.m. with Military Honors.

Members received a cemetery statistical report which provided an overview on each Missouri State Veterans Cemetery listing numbers of interments, veteran data and cemetery history.

Mr. Rasmussen discussed the cemeteries current activities and his membership in the Homeless Veterans Burial Committee at Jackson County. SCI Corporation has had this program going on St. Louis for a long time and has been very successful. SCI approved Colonial Shield Funeral Home to accept all homeless veterans and Higginsville Veterans Cemetery has agreed to be the interment site if they meet eligibility requirements. Military Funeral Honors Program will provide full military honors and the flag will accepted by the American Legion Auxiliary. He stated they will try to make this a strong community event and some benefits in the program should be to get some publicity about the cemetery.

Swan Lake issue is still ongoing however there have been some changes in the wording of their advertising methods. They ad now appears to indicate they are an independent business. Mr. Rasmussen stated the latest figures he has heard in terms of cost is \$13,000 for internment.

Commissioner Ross spoke to the Kansas City Star due to their interest in this issue. The reporter stated he received a call from a concerned veteran who visited Swan Lake and was suspicious about what was going on. The Consumer Reporter stated that he would like to speak to people that have been affected by the situation. One particular family whom we have been in contact with and have copies on file had hired an attorney and requested a refund. They received an 80% refund back and were informed the additional 20% would not be returned due to state statute. John Eckhoff, St. Louis County Human Services, stated that if Swan Lake is representing themselves as a 501 (c) 3 with the newspaper or a veterans organization in order to get a discount on the advertising they may be

caught on that. Commissioner Ross asked if the Military Funeral Honors Program performs services at Swan Lake. James Whitfield, MO Military Funeral Honors Program stated they are called on regularly.

VSO Grants: Hal Dulle, Deputy Director

VSO Grant Program- Hal Dulle had no new updated information to provide. Past meeting we indicated we had received request for \$850,000 plus dollars for the \$750,000 available this year. We provided grants to all those who received grants last year in the amount they received last year. There are a few additional funds remaining and we are working with the Purple Heart Organization relative to their Service Officer Program here in Missouri. That issue has not been resolved to date.

Veterans Benefits Awareness Program: Stan Baughn, Director Veterans Benefits Awareness

Benefits Supermarkets – Stan Baughn reported to the Commissioners a Mini Supermarket/ Mayors Prayer Breakfast organized by Paul Connors, VFW will be held at the Adams Point Golf Course Club House in Blue Springs on November 5th. The Missouri Veterans Commission will set up a booth at this event. Commissioner Ross will be participating in the program.

Mr. Baughn advised that 10 -12 Supermarkets are anticipated for 2005. 26 Supermarkets have been held so far with 7,493 registered veterans attending. Mr. Baughn stated the partnerships experienced with MVC and service organizations make this all possible in reaching veterans.

Lt. Governor Joe Maxwell's office has referred the state of Illinois to MVC to assist them in the startup of a VBATF.

Outreach: Pat Rowe Kerr, Veterans Benefits Awareness Coordinator

Outreach – Pat Rowe Kerr reported that her outreach is directed toward the men and women in the current military situation since 2001. She explained their needs and that many are not getting met because of financial reasons. She stated she working with specific service men and women who either while they are deployed or after they returned who are experiencing these difficulties and job problems. Ms. Kerr is working to heighten the awareness of the Missouri Veterans Commission so that we can be a one-stop place to get to the veteran service organizations, VA and other areas that already have programs developed to assist.

Ms. Kerr stated her outreach efforts looks at National groups with dollars to help assist our service men and women such as Intrepid Fund, Fallen

Heroes, Unmet Needs Program, USA Cares, Stan the Man Foundation and many others. An example she noted was Anheuser Busch gave the Intrepid Fund 1 million dollars, however those dollars will only downfall go to the families with lost and wounded. She would like to make contact with certain corporations to make a one time donation to the Military Family Relief Fund to get it established or make donations to the MVC Foundation, Inc. MVC receives information about an injured soldier, she contacts the family and proceeds to find dollars to assist them.

A request from Landstuhl, Germany was sent to MVC they are desperately in need of backpacks for the injured so they can carry things while trying to ambulate with crutches, etc. Ms Kerr has been working with the Department of Revenue in getting money for the backpacks.

Trekking for the Troops raised funds to promote awareness of the Missouri Veterans Commission and she hopes to make this an annual event and possibly even an event in other areas where we have facilities located.

She reported the Missouri National Guard has informed us they expect by the end of next year 95 to 98% of all of their guard men and women will have been deployed.

III. NEW BUSINESS:

Ron Taylor advised the Commissioners in their packet is a copy of a message from the National Commander regarding DOD, VA must work together to ensure seamless transition of U.S. service members. He stated gaps do exist noted that Missouri National Guard stated that they even have gaps on information on which of the soldiers have been injured. This information is not necessarily reaching them very quickly. Ms. Kerr stated its taking approximately three months for this information. She also stated they are having problems finding where their medical records have been sent. Commissioner Niewoehner stated that regarding not getting their claims through, unfortunately the present administrations budget that is currently before congress cuts the money available for benefits into the VA 25%.

Hal Dulle reported on Legislative matters. The election two days ago and in Missouri the Senate will have 9 new members (7 Republican, 2 Democrat) and the House will have 35 new members (22 Republican, 13 Democrats). There will be 37 to 44 members on the Legislative Tour this year. He advised the Republicans in the House caucused last night and have announced Rod Jetton as Speaker of the House; Carl Bearden, President Pro-Tem; Tom Dempsey, Majority Floor Leader; and Jack Jackson will remain the House Veterans Commission Chair.

In the Senate, Michael Gibbons will be Pro-Tem and Peter Kinder President of the Senate.

Ron Taylor addressed the Commissioners with a recommendation for a change in the resident rate charges to be effective January 2005 due to increased costs. He noted even with VA contract which keeps MVC below some of the other increases in pharmacy cost we will still be seeing a 12 % increase in that cost. We will hopefully be seeing some increases again in salary for RN's, LPN's, and direct care staff as well as other employees. Considering all that and the state of our Trust Fund, Mr. Taylor would like to recommend an approximate 10% increase in the resident rate charge which would raise the maximum charge to \$1,750.00 from \$1,587.00. He stated the reason for doing that we have had some complaints from the Homes when we come up with things such as \$1,587.00 or \$1,343.00 it's hard to keep track of this for the residents therefore we rounded it off to \$1,750.00. This does keep us about 30% below the cost as some of the other surrounding states such as Kansas, Oklahoma, Kentucky and etc. This increase is based on the ability to pay the veteran always has a minimum of \$90 remaining. We do account for veterans with spouses to make insure that they have enough to live on. Mr. Taylor stated that last year approximately 89% of our resident did pay the maximum most of them with limited income qualify for a VA pension that can be almost as much. Commissioner West asked if this increase could wait until we find out if we get additional fund from the legislature. Mr. Taylor stated we won't know on the legislature until April or May and we have traditionally done this in January because most of the veterans are getting increases in social security as well as increase in their VA pension benefits. He noted 60% of our veteran are getting pension benefits and the amount they get is partially based on what MVC charges, if we do not raise charges we can have residents who no longer qualify for VA benefits because we didn't charge enough to make them eligible. Other state rates range from \$2,200 to \$2,700 a month. After much discussion the Commissioners voted on the recommendation. Commissioner Ross made a motion to accept the recommendation as stated \$1,750.00 maximum. Commissioner Miller seconded the motion. By a voice vote the motion passed unanimously.

Nancy Arnold, Director Poplar Bluff VAMC spoke regarding CARES Commission. The CARES Commission was established to provide an objective, independent assessment to Secretary Principi on the DNCP. Looking to the future it is clear that the demand for access to the VA Healthcare system will increase over the next two decades. Mr. Taylor was appointed to serve on the Subcommittee which will conduct four meetings over the next year to look at all aspects of services at Poplar Bluff VAMC. The first meeting will be held in January. The project should have a complete cost analyst study ready December 2005.

NEXT MEETING

The next Commission meeting will be held on Veterans Appreciation Day at the Capitol Building. The date will be announced at a later time.

The Commission celebrated their 15th Year Anniversary.

St. Louis VA Regional office will do a presentation to the Commissioners followed by a tour of the facility.

With no further business to come before the Commission, the meeting was adjourned.



Ronald L. Taylor, Secretary